

Article 45

Diversity in Learning: A Comparison of Traditional Learning Theories With Learning Styles and Cultural Values of Native American Students

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Research on the educational performance of Native Americans consistently indicates that these students perform at levels below that of the majority population and in some cases below the levels of all other culturally diverse student populations. These low educational performance levels have been related to other psychological, social, and developmental issues, which continue to consistently permeate members of indigenous tribes and clans throughout North America. This article will examine the literature related to educational alternatives that attempt to meet the traditional values and learning styles of Native American students.

Our elders have maintained a tradition of transmitting knowledge, values, and history through oral tradition. We learn from the experiences of others. There is something beyond the story itself that takes hold of each listener's heart and remains in memory. (Skinner, 1999, p. 107)

Research shows that the education of minority students in the United States results in a disproportionate level of academic failure across all minorities (Brand, 1987; Garcia, 1991; Oakes, 1985). Specifically among Native Americans, there is an alarmingly

high level of academic failure, special education, and learning disability designations, and diagnoses of “emotional disorders” are evident within the Native American student population (Chadwick, Bahr, & Strauss, 1977; Sanders, 1987; Yates, 1987). Compounding and interrelated to this trend is the consistency with which this population of students report feelings of alienation, inadequacy, and anxiety (Berry, 1969; House, 2003). Bryde (1970) reported that Native American children consistently present with higher levels of feelings of rejection, depression, and social withdrawal than do non-Native children. Additionally, Native American teenagers demonstrate a lower self-image than any other minority group, and, subsequently, evidence the highest rate of suicide (Youngman & Sadongei, 1974), the highest school dropout rate among all minority groups, and are significantly more at risk to be placed in special education programs (O'Brien, 1990; McCarty, 2009).

Numerous theories have been espoused to remediate these complex problems in educating indigenous students in general, and North American Natives specifically. This paper will review the current literature related to enhancing the educational experience of Native American students by comparing their unique cultural values and learning style perspectives to the instructional directives of traditional approaches to learning, such as functionalism, behaviorism, cognitivism, and situated learning/constructivist/learner centered.

History of Native American Education

In order to understand the present educational dilemma of academic success in our Native American students, the history of educational development for this population must be reviewed. Skinner (1999) described the control of tribal populations through a series of treaties from 1778 to 1871 as “cultural and linguistic genocide” (p. 108). These treaties established guidelines that controlled the education for Native American children with the general philosophy to “civilize the Indians.” Part of this process was to establish schools away from the tribal units whereby the children could be orientated into European-American cultural practices with the inherent intent to extinguish their traditional cultural heritage (Skinner, 1999).

This “boarding school” process facilitated the adherence to the new majority culture, as well as extended isolation from the traditional tribal culture. This environment resulted in degradation of traditional use of native language, spiritual practices, and traditional learning through communal sharing of knowledge and experience. These practices were in direct conflict with the maintenance of cultural continuity and Native identity, which are important aspects for maintaining a cultural connection regardless of the culture (Skinner, 1999). Skinner (1999) indicated that at the beginning of this process, 604 Native American languages existed; currently only 206 remain with approximately 50 languages facing extinction due to lack of effective traditional use and promulgation to the current generation.

This loss of language, cultural practices, and associated values is consistently cited as a key contributor to the current educational dilemma facing Native American students. Cajete (1999) asserted that the structure of the educational system in the United States presents a challenge to the unique psychological value orientations of the Native American population and can account for some of the discrepancies in their academic

achievement. Further investigation indicated that motivation and successful learning by Native American students is dependent upon the educational task being relevant to their cultural constellation. Historically, many of the initiatives developed to promote academic achievement have not adequately considered the Native culture and its relevancy in the learning process (Cajete, 1999).

Traditional Native American Learning Styles and Values

Although Native American tribes and clans present a diverse collection of traditional and cultural beliefs, research indicates some consistency in the core collective value systems of this population. Traditional Native values generally consist of sharing, cooperation, noninterference, sense of being, importance of the tribe and extended family, harmony with nature, a present-time orientation, preference for explanation of natural phenomena according to the spiritual realm, and a deep respect for elders (Garrett, 1995, 1996a, 1996b). Many of these core values are in direct contrast to the mainstream majority with the emphasis on saving, domination, competition, aggression, doing, individualism and the nuclear family, mastery over nature, a future-time orientation, a preference for scientific explanations of everything, "clock-watching," winning, and a reverence for youth (Sue & Sue, 1999). The obvious conflict between the majority culture and Native American culture can be especially problematic when Native American students are forced to reconcile these differences on a daily bases within the educational systems within the United States (Garrett, Bellon-Harn, Torres-Rivera, Garrett, & Roberts, 2003).

Some of the possible ways in which these inherent conflicts have manifested themselves include: (1) academic underachievement related to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and rejection (Giles, 1985; Luftig, 1983; Wilson & Black, 1978); (2) situational adjustment which has been linked to "forced" acculturation to accept a new value system (Garrett et al., 2003); (3) the contradiction between generosity, sharing, and cooperation of the Native American culture with the majority viewpoint of competition, individualism, and acquisitiveness (Garrett et al., 2003; Nel, 1994); (4) private versus public praise and recognition (Garrett et al., 2003); (5) the conflict of concepts of time, space, and human beings' relationship to the universe (Yates, 1987); (6) an inherent deep respect for individuals and their feelings which is manifested through a complex nonverbal communication style including lack of direct eye contact, high level of humility, and low level of verbal participation, which is often inappropriately interpreted as a lack of knowledge in the academic setting (Garrett et al., 2003); (7) traditional beliefs of individual freedom, choice, and non-interference which manifested itself in Native American parents viewing their children as autonomous, equal individuals who are responsible for their own choices, unlike majority culture parents who view their children as personal property and thus responsible for their choices (Blanchard, 1983); and (8) a deep and intertwined connection to nature and spiritual traditions that come in direct conflict with the majority attitude towards its relationship with scientific investigation (Garrett et al., 2003).

These components of diversity between the Native American value system and that of the majority culture offer a number of implications in the educational system serving this population. Garrett and Garrett (1996) discussed the concept of the "circle

within circles” that describes the traditional Native culture value system from a perspective of power, relation, peace, and unity. These value descriptors refer to the sacred relationship, which is shared by all living beings and the subsequent responsibility of all living beings as helpers and contributors to the maintenance of harmony and balance through interrelated relationships. The elements of the circle within circles includes: (1) the spirit within us, including the culmination of each individual’s experiences representing the power that comes from the very essence of one’s being; (2) the family and/or clan, the relational center of the community; (3) the natural environment and all of its relationships with living beings; and (4) the spirit world that includes the Creator, ancestors, and other spirit helpers/guides. In essence, all life is interdependent and exists in a dynamic state of harmony and balance, which maintains a continuous flowing and cycling of energy that each living being contributes to the Circle of Life (Garrett et al., 2003).

Thus, Garrett et al. (2003) noted that an effective educational model for Native American students must be prepared to embrace basic value centered criteria including cooperation and sharing, modesty, being, time orientation, tribal significance, elder and familial importance, and non-interference with the natural order of the universe. This is also coupled with the individual learning styles that all individuals, Native or non-Native, bring into the classroom setting. Lamb (2003) pointed out that relationship and mentoring facilitated traditional Native American teaching and that learning was nurtured and not forced or dictated upon the student; learning was dependent upon the student’s respect, motivation, interests, and gifts. Thus, the indigenous learning experience was perceptually connected to the tribal culture, language, and land, and was facilitated by knowledgeable elders and teachers. Such an educational model can produce profound effects due to the intimate nature of the learning relationship and the learner-centered approach to each student.

Pedagogy of European-American Traditional Approaches to Learning

Native American students have been subjected to the general European-American trends of educational model development over the past century including functionalism, behaviorism, cognitivism, and situated or learner centered learning models (Bredo, 1997). A brief description of each of these approaches to learning will help to establish a basis for connecting traditional learning theory to those which have been determined by research to be most appropriate for working with Native American students.

The functionalist approach to learning espoused the concept that the organism and the environment interact as partners in determining resultant behavior. Reflective intelligence was learned through social interaction and the development of an environment conducive to learning, and this experiential process is critical to learning (Bredo, 1997). Behaviorists believed that an organism solely learned through the process of stimulus and response. Thus, the teacher or facilitator could control any behavior learning by controlling the environment or stimulus, reinforcing the desired behavior and thus predicting the resultant behavior. This placed the responsibility of learning on the teacher and rendered the learner as a passive participant in the process, merely responding to the controlled environment (Bredo, 1997). Cognitivism, on the other hand, placed the responsibility of learning on the organism, and identified it as an internal

function of the organism. This approach to learning combines some of the components of functionalism and behaviorism, yet goes further to identify that learning is facilitated by effective process utilization by the learner and how the teacher assists the learner in accomplishing the goal of learning. Cognitivists do not emphasize either social interaction or motivation to be critical in facilitation of developing the learning process (Bredo, 1997).

The current trend of learning theory is based on the learner-centered concept which has its roots in situated learning and constructivist theories. This approach generally considers learning to be centered in some sociocultural/historical context and espouses that learning is facilitated through the interactions and interrelationships learners experience through the context of their world. Thus, as their contextual world changes, so does the interrelationship to learning change, which makes the learner also a co-creator of learning and context development. This approach to learning places the teacher as the guide for the learner and recognizes the importance of the contextual nature of learning which must be considered in developing the most effective learning environment or culture (Bredo, 1997). Thus, the challenge for educators of Native American students is to match their unique indigenous value system and learning traditions with those aspects of traditional European-American learning theories and develop a comprehensive and effective educational model that will best serve this population.

Challenges to Educators

A number of researchers have identified eight core strategies which can assist in the recognition and incorporation of the diversity of indigenous cultural values in curricula:

1. Provide opportunities for visual and oral learning styles (Little Soldier, 1985; Sanders, 1987).
2. Incorporate culturally relevant and sensitive materials into the curriculum (Cummins, 1992; Garrett, 1995, 1996a; Macias, 1989).
3. Accommodate for family and/or tribe-related absences (Canabal, 1995).
4. Incorporate Native American mentors and elders from the tribal community in the curriculum (Kerbeshian, 1989).
5. Encourage cooperative learning and sharing approaches through peer tutoring and group learning (Swisher, 1990).
6. Encourage inter-group competition rather than individual competition in the classroom (Brown, 1980).
7. Focus on short-term goal orientation which is consistent with traditional Native values of being (Little Soldier, 1985; Sanders, 1987).
8. Model culturally sensitive behaviors and skills emphasizing personal choice and assisting students in distinguishing behaviors that are appropriate for specific situations (Little Soldier, 1985; Sanders, 1987).

Garrett et al. (2003) suggested that in order to implement these educational processes, the school service professionals must determine the characteristics of the specific student population being served, including the degree of cultural commitment by the students and their families, the setting of the student (i.e., a reservation, rural or urban

setting), and the tribal structure, customs, and beliefs which are generally relevant to the student population. A determination of the presence and magnitude of cultural discontinuity for the specific student population being considered is critical to determining which educational interventions are appropriate. And above all else, Garrett et al. (2003) noted that developing trust with Native students requires that educators be attentive and responsive to them in a culturally appropriate context. The strategies suggested noted previously provide a framework for identifying consistencies between Native educational needs and the traditional European-American learning theories.

Tradition Meets Practice

The primary issue at hand is which components of European-American learning theories are most consistent with the acknowledged values and learning styles of Native American students. Like any attempt to effectively teach a diverse population of students, Native or non-Native, an eclectic perspective must be necessarily considered. First, no two students are alike regardless of their cultural or experiential histories. Second, even within specific cultural contexts, students maintain different levels of acculturation. Finally, these same students will necessarily differ as to specific learning styles and values (Cajete, 1999). These characteristics indicate there is no single educational approach that will fit all students; however, there are parts of most pedagogical learning theories that will enhance the effectiveness of the learning experience for the general student population.

Hanks (1996) specifically looks to a constructivist perspective to respond to this dilemma and identifies five pedagogic principles: (1) teacher guides rather than “tells”; (2) emphasis on learner-developed understanding; (3) problem-focused instruction that is culturally and experientially relevant; (4) cooperative versus competitive learning environment; and (5) time-flexible versus time-rigid instruction. According to Bredo (1997), these principles are consistent with many components of learner-centered instruction. Marrone and Tarr (2005) noted that a truly eclectic approach to learner-centered curriculum will offer social learning experiences utilizing interactional techniques, alternative instructional practices, student engaged and collaborative performance exercises, relevancy-based activities, and encouragement of students to pursue strength-based curriculum objectives. They seek to accomplish this by establishing student-centered control of the learning process and spending more time in the construction of knowledge through relevant activities.

Discussion

A review of the research related to Native American student values and learning styles, as well as learning theory instructional modalities, provides an opportunity to connect the consistent components of each. Traditionally, the indigenous cultures have fostered learning through a historical-cultural modality with the greatest emphasis placed on the communality of instruction. This instruction was facilitated through the time, attention, and relationship that the more knowledgeable members of the community or tribe could offer to the learners. This approach to instruction considered the strengths of

the learner and the relevancy of the lesson being taught with the focus being on the learner, not the lesson, thus the process rather than the product.

It appears clear that to effectively engage Native American learners in the educational process, an eclectic approach must be considered. In reviewing the various approaches to learning, along with the diversity of students within the population, clearly no single approach will universally accommodate all students. Many of the components and processes of the learner-centered approach to instruction appear to connect well with the traditional methodology of Native American learning processes. To best serve this population and to begin to mediate the systemic educational failures related to Native American students, administrators must consider the valuable research at their disposal. The implications of not doing so will continue to perpetuate the history of educational ineffectiveness that has negatively impacted this group of individuals. Those implications are not only related to low educational performance, but as the research indicates, have long term negative impacts on the mental and physical well being of this population.

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